PUT NOT YOUR TRUST IN PRINCES: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CITY AND THE TOWER, 1066 - 1321

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Although it may be taken as axiomatic that any statement of fact about medieval times is questionable it is generally agreed that William, Duke of Normandy, having inflicted terrible casualties on the English nobility at the Battle of Hastings, expected that the country would submit voluntarily. When this did not happen a further display of force was called for. During the next ten weeks he made a slow, intimidating and circuitous advance on London, the key to his future realm, founding castles en route. He met little or no opposition until he reached Southwark where, after a sharp skirmish, the citizens withdrew behind the City walls. William then burnt Southwark and prepared to lay siege to London.

By this stage morale in the City was very low, as William would have known from his spies from among the many Norman merchants living and trading there. Thus when the emissaries of the City came out to him to submit he was in a position to dictate terms. Having asked the delegation to accept him as the rightful heir to Edward the Confessor he promised to uphold "the laws and customs as they were in King Edward's day" and, as historians know, confirmed this pledge in writing. One can imagine the delegation returning home feeling rather pleased with themselves. Continuity of ancient municipal customs and rules was assured but, and this is the point, they were assured at the express command and will of the King, not by inherent right of the City, a fact of which the citizens were to receive painful reminders in years to come whenever they attempted to maintain their "rights" against the Crown.

At this point in time the State was not supreme. The Normans had still to conquer the remainder of England and William saw London as the source of money to support his forces. He needed a peaceful, prosperous City but he knew he could not rely on the loyalty or support of his new subjects. His problem was how to dominate and control the City, which at that time probably had a populace of between 14,000-18,000, without alieniating the citizens or interfering in their affairs or, indeed, tying down more than a

handful of his forces, which comprised of some 5,000 Barons and Knights from Flanders and Brittany, whom he required to complete his conquest - a task which kept him occupied for the remainder of his life.

His first act was to dispatch an advance party to the City to build a campaign fort as a secure base against what his biographer, William of Poitiers, described as "the restlessness of the vast and fierce population". It was this hastily constructed fortification, protected on two sides by the south east angle of the then surviving Roman City walls and by the river to the south, which was to become the Tower of London. Within 20 years the great White Tower, built with ragstone shipped up river from Kent and with limestone from Caen, stood 90 feet high. It towered over the city of simple wooden dwellings, dominating it and commanding the River Thames, and thus the trade route of the Londoners. To the citizens it was the visible expression of foreign conquest "built not for the defence of the Kingdom but only to oppress harmless citizens". To William and his successors it was of vital strategic importance, well placed not only to curb any hostile activities by the increasingly prosperous and assertive Londoners but also, of course, to defend the approach to the nerve centre of the Kingdom.

In medieval times the King was an absolute ruler and, with his household, the centre of government. Seldom spending more than a few weeks in the same place he was constantly on the move visiting his domains or leading his army. In his absence from the Tower, the centre of his government and the most secure place in his Kingdom, he had to ensure that it remained in the charge of a man on whose loyalty he could depend; for the man who held the Tower controlled London and he who held London controlled England. This man was the Constable, one of the highest officers in the land. Not surprisingly the earliest Constables were Norman Knights but subsequently the medieval Constables were invariably great Lords, spiritual or temporal. Among the former were four Archbishops of Canterbury of whom Thomas à Becket (1162) was one. Another was a Cardinal, Ottoboni de Fieschi (1263-64), the Papal Legate, who became Pope Adrian V in 1276, a reflection, perhaps, of the power of the church which owned 20% of the land.

In those days, when the great were rewarded with perquisites and land rather than wages, the Constable had many material privileges. He disposed of considerable patronage and was allowed, among other things, a toll of wine, oysters, mussels, cockles and rushes from ships entering London. We know also, for example, that he received a yearly payment from everyone who had a weir (a fence of stakes set in a stream for taking

fish) in the Thames until 1197 when Richard I issued the first "Thames Conservancy Charter" which commanded that all weirs be removed from the Thames.

One assumes that Constables sought every opportunity to increase their wealth and that many of them used ruthless methods to do so, e.g. in 1323 Stapleton, a Bishop of Exeter and the Constable, was murdered by the London mob on account, it is said, of his extortions. Lord Say suffered a similar fate in 1450.

The power of the Constable extended beyond the walls of the Tower. He held jurisdiction over the Jews of London and historians may wish to be reminded why this was so. The Jews were brought over from Normandy by the first Norman Kings to provide them with revenue; by taxation, by charges for a variety of activities and in the final resort, by confiscation. Their role, by and large, was restricted to lending money in various ways. To ensure that the Crown received its cut, all transactions had to be registered in local 'chests' (archae) which were supervised by a central department, the Exchequer and Justices of the Jews. The Jews worked in an environment which was often hostile and they relied on the King's protection. In London the Constable was charged, on the King's behalf, with protecting them in accordance with the charter granted to them by Henry II. The Tower was their natural haven in time of peril. For instance in 1264, during the Civil War, when Simon de Montfort and his followers attacked the Jews, looted their homes and desecrated their synagogues, some of the Jews were escorted by the Mayor to the safety of the Tower.

Today it may seem strange that this community who lived and worked in the centre of the City should have been supervised by the Constable rather than by the City authorities. The explanation goes back to a day in 1244 when the Royal Justices of Henry III sat at the Tower of London to hear pleas of the Crown for the City of London. Among the questions they asked the City Authorities were what were the escheats (property lapsing to the Crown on the owner's death without heirs) from the Jews. 'The City answers that escheats of the Jews are not their business but that of the Constable of the Tower of London and the Justices of the Jews, because the Jews belonged to the King, nor has anything to do with them ever belonged to the City; and therefore the Constable of the Tower of London and the Justices of the Jews are bound to answer the King for these lands and tenements'.

The medieval Jewish community of London numbered up to 1,000, although

this was down to some 500 by 1290, out of a population which had probably doubled during the century from 20,000 to 40,000. The Jewry where they lived was near the great market of Cheap, in the area between Cheapside and Gresham (then called Catte) Street. They had first settled in the street then, and now, called Old Jewry but expanded westwards, centring in the 13th century on Ironmonger Lane.

This Jewish quarter of the City constituted in effect a Liberty, a clearly defined geographical area, within which the Constable acted on the mandate of the Justices of the Jews. He had a court which exercised both civil and criminal jurisdiction, maintained order within the area by means of a Sergeant, had wide powers of arrest and imprisonment over Jews, whether resident in, or visiting, London, and was the sole gaoler to whom Jews might be committed to custody. Many Jews were, in fact, imprisoned in the Tower. A special tax supposed to represent a third of all Jewish property was imposed in 1240. Those who could not pay were sent to the Tower in the expectation that their suffering would help to produce some undisclosed assets. Then in 1278 Jews throughout the country were arrested on charges of clipping the coinage and imprisoned in the Tower until the following year. The jurisdiction of the Tower authorities over the Jews ended with their expulsion from England in 1290. Although this action gained the King temporary popularity with everyone who was in debt to the Jews, it increased his difficulties for he had depended on them to replenish the empty Exchequer. The City too soon found it was a mistake to get rid of its creditors as Edward was obliged to resort to Lombard merchants and was soon entirely in the hands of Italian money-lenders and goldsmiths. The power of the Constable was not, of course, limited to his jurisdiction over the Jews but the degree to which it was exercised depended on the strength of the King. The Constable was always to some extent a political figure and even today the nomination is made by the Prime Minister to the Queen. Until comparatively recent times the right to appoint him was sought after by different political factions. Conflict between the City and the Constable/Tower could easily result if an anti-Crown or anti-Government caucus controlled the City. The history of the 13th century amply illustrates these early power struggles.

For example in 1215 King John's concession to the citizens giving them the right of annually electing their own Mayor failed to secure their allegiance, and the King's party defected to the Barons led by Robert Fitz-Walter, Baron of Dunmow. The Barons, by way of further security for fulfilment of the articles of Magna Carta, demanded and obtained the custody of the City including the Tower, whose Constable was Stephen Langton, the

Archbishop of Canterbury. For a year or more they remained in the City, which became their headquarters, having entered into a mutual compact with the inhabitants to make no terms with the King without the consent of both parties.

Things were to change during the reign of his son, Henry III. Permanently in need of money to support his expensive projects at home and to finance his campaigns to retain the English possessions in France, he ruled the City with a strong hand. Eventually the nobility, excluded from government by foreigners and resisting high taxes, revolted. Two years of civil war ensued, ending with the capture of the King and his heir, Edward. 1265 saw, firstly, the calling of the first true embryo Parliament where bishops, barons, knights and burghers of the towns all met and, secondly, the escape of Edward and the Battle of Evesham. Edward exploited his victory by a most effective campaign against the suddenly disorganised barons and the City was taken into the King's hands. The Constable, Sir Hugh Fitz-Otes, was appointed Warden/Custos in place of the Mayor, Fitz-Thomas, who had been summoned to Windsor under safe conduct, imprisoned and who, incidentally, was never heard of again; bailiffs were substituted for the Sheriffs; and the Constable governed the City until 1269 when the King committed the City to Edward, who ruled it through his deputy, Fitz-Otes, who was reappointed Constable. In 1270 Edward allowed the City to elect a Mayor from amongst themselves, and the uneasy status quo was restored - but not for very long. On succeeding his father in 1272 Edward, a great warrior, using strong and arbitrary measures, set forth to pacify England and to subdue the Scots and Welsh. Thus occupied, and absent from London for long intervals, one can assume that the citizens who were funding his campaigns became bolder in their opposition. Edward needed their money but he did not brook opposition lightly if it challenged his power.

Matters came to a head in 1285 when the King's Justiciars (Justices in eyre) summoned the Mayor, Gregory de Rokesley, Aldermen and Sheriffs to the Tower of London where they were sitting to give an account how the King's peace had been kept in the City. Previously the citizens had always displayed great respect for the Justiciars whenever they came to the Tower for the purpose of holding pleas of the Crown. A deputation of the Common Council would process to the Tower to give official welcome to the Justiciars on behalf of the citizens - and "make ample presents". Nevertheless these sessions were were very unpopular as officials had to defend their actions. On this occasion however the Mayor refused to appear except as a private citizen under no magisterial responsibility, on the grounds that he had not received the customary 40 days' notice. Having

taken off his mayor's robes at All Hallows Church - the limit of the City's jurisdiction - he handed the City Seal over to Stephen Aswy, the Alderman of Cheap Ward. On entering the Chamber where the Justiciars sat he excused his unofficial appearance and explained his reasons. The King's Treasurer immediately declared the City to be taken into the King's hands, on the pretext that it was found to be without a Mayor. Gregory de Rokesley, and those who had accompanied him, were ordered to appear before the King the next day. The King was so incensed by this bold conduct of a man in whom he had put his complete trust (de Rokesley had also been Mayor from 1275 until 1282, was Chief Assay Master of all the King's Mints, Keeper of the King's Exchange in London, one of the King's Butlers, etc.) that he suspended the City franchise and appointed the Constable, Sir Ralph de Sandwich, as Warden. This suspension was to last 13 years until 1298 when the King restored the City Liberties, not however without a large fine for the concession. Thus for 18 of the 28 years between 1265 and 1298 the Constable governed the City as the King's proxy; his directive being "to preserve the City of London and all its liberties and ancient customs unhurt". In other words the King was content that the City should manage its own affairs but when it came to them endeavouring to maintain their rights against his sovereignty he took prompt and effective action to bring them into line.

You may have in your mind's eye a picture of the City in the 13th century: not really much more than a very large village in today's terms with on its outskirts, the mightiest fortress of the age, its fortifications much as they are today. It embodied the power of the King and, in his shadow, that of the Constable. How great this power was, in the City's terms, is well illustrated by the Iter of 1321, which was convened "to examine into unlawful colligations, confederations and conventions by oaths" which were known, or supposed, to have been formed in the City. For six months not only the Mayor, Sheriffs and Aldermen for the time being but everyone who had filled any office since the last Iter, a period of nearly half a century, as well as twelve representatives from each Ward were called upon to be in constant attendance at the Tower. All charters had to be produced and persons who had grievances of any kind were invited to appear. The effects on trade, commerce and municipal business can well be imagined.

It was not always to be thus for, of course, the exercise of such power depended on the strength of the ruler. For example, the reigns of Charles I, Cromwell and Charles II, their relationships with the City and the major role control of the Tower played in their power struggles are a particularly fascinating chapter in our history. Mayors were imprisoned in the Tower,

and there was even a Lord Mayor, Sir John Robinson (of "before you can say Jack Robinson" fame) who held the offices of Lord Mayor and Lieutenant of the Tower concurrently, no doubt because, in the uncertain conditions after the Restoration, it was felt necessary to combine the offices in the person of a man in whom the Crown had complete confidence.